

PBM Unearthed

The Mysterious Realm of Play-By-Mail Gaming

July 17th, 2022

1st Glorious Issue!

Issue 1



Do you dare turn the page to learn what lies beyond?

PlayByMail.Net

PBM Unearthed is a newsletter devoted to PBM gaming. PBM stands for Play-By-Mail. PBM is a way to play games through the mail, a form of entertainment which brings turn results directly to your mailbox at home or to your post office box. Is your mailbox overrun by strange junk mail and greedy bills that want to gobble all of your money? Then you *definitely* need one or more PBM games in *your* life. After all, PBM games are a way to have fun in a way that you may not have imagined before. Plus, your mailbox doesn't need a graphics card. That's what your imagination is for. *Try PBM gaming, and take your imagination for a ride!*

PBM Unearthed is intended to be a PBM publication that doesn't take forever to read, one which will focus more on frequency and reliability than page count. The maximum size of any given issue of **PBM Unearthed** will be no more than eight pages in length - *which will equate to four pieces of paper, when printed on both the front and back of each page*. Issues can be shorter. The modern era is a hectic place, and **PBM Unearthed** hopes to be a bit of PBM tranquility in the midst of all the madness that life throws at you.

PBM Unearthed will also be aimed at providing the prison populations of inmates with news from the PBM realm that lies beyond the walls of the incarceration facilities to which they are confined. In case you didn't already know, inmates have been playing PBM games for decades. PBM gaming is peaceful pastime - a harmless, but exciting, form of entertainment that is conducive to a more peaceful prison environment, as PBM games help to keep the minds of inmates occupied while they serve out their sentences. Inmates are often one of life's numerous "forgotten" segments of society's overall population, but just like people in the outside world, they value entertainment in game form, also. PBM gaming is a medium of gaming that **PBM Unearthed** wants to help raise awareness of throughout and across society, because it has a lot to offer everyone that enjoys a good game. Some issues of **PBM Unearthed** may feature PBM articles or PBM art authored or created by inmates, to allow the incarcerated PBMer a way to give back to PBM society.

Your Turn Results
Have Arrived!



Turn Results

Can your mailbox handle the excitement?

PBM Unearthed is brought to you by PlayByMail.Net.

Contact: playbymail.net@gmail.com

What is the future of Play-By-Mail gaming?

Charles Mosteller

Trying to see into the future is always a fool's gamble. Perhaps instead of asking what is the future of Play-By-Mail gaming, I might ought to be asking, instead, what could the future of Play-By-Mail gaming be? If past is prologue, then we're either in for a really exciting future, or a truly sad one, or quite possibly somewhere in between. Let's begin by looking at what a few others have said about PBM over on the [PlayByMail.Net Facebook page](#), recently.

"PBM as we knew it has moved on. There are still legacy companies running legacy games. I expect I will run DungeonWorld until I drop dead, hopefully in about 50 years. But new games? I doubt we'll see many new ones as we understand them. But the hobby is still there, it just morphed. That game that was all the rage a year or two ago, where you had to work out who the traitor was on a spaceship? PBM, basically. Slightly morphed format, but recognisable. Turn-based games with longer turnaround times and between turn interaction - there's still a market for it. But people who are going to make it big now need to do it with a modern format."

Steve Tierney [[DungeonWorld](#) GM and Owner of [Madhouse UK](#)]

"Perhaps it depends on the objective. Is it to bring in a significant number of new players? Or get players who have drifted away to re-engage? If the former, I suspect a re-branding would be required since the word "mail" doesn't align with the reality of how many people communicate today. There are advantages to PBM/turn-based games as you all know; I think people just don't hear about them. Can't one of you get some PBM gaming into Season 6 of "Stranger Things"?"

David Spencer

"My instinct tells me a breakout hit from nowhere that suddenly gets the Yutes interested in episodic gaming with intentional time delays would be a starting point. So that's easy, just dash off Civilization meets MULE meets Dwarf Fortress, wrap it in text, and watch the money roll in."

Robert Hayes

"I also think that sometimes when we look at "Play by Turn" we forget that games like Urban Dead and Kingdom of Loathing have had very popular runs and still somewhat popular, and any PbM/PBem would understand the mechanisms of gameplay as being directly related to PbM type gaming. (They have X number of actions a day and a web interface)"

Zach Edwardson

A few decades ago, there were hundreds of PBM companies in operation, simultaneously. Many hundreds of different play by mail games did these companies run. PBM gaming flourished. PBM companies thrived. PBM players partook of and enjoyed a golden era of play by mail gaming. *Then, technology struck!*

The transition to the Internet era proved to be an extinction level event for PBM gaming. PBM companies tried all kinds of things. They strove to be more efficient and more profitable. They sought to harness the technological wonders of things like e-mail and the World Wide Web. Prior to the Web becoming firmly entrenched in our lives, many PBM companies even sought to capitalize upon computer bulletin board systems, or BBSs as they more commonly came to be known. Now, fast forward to the present day, and what do we have left?

A paucity of a selection, and especially if what you want to choose from are PBM games of the old fashioned variety where turn orders and turn results were sent via the postal service. That said, there are some PBM games of old that did survive the transition to digital format. These are the lineal descendants of yesteryear's paper-format PBM games of old. But is the PBM world of today better than yesteryear's?

These days, old school paper-format PBM games tend to get derided or dismissed summarily out of hand. It is almost as if postage has become taboo, in spite of the fact that PBM games in paper format towered over what PBM companies have been able to achieve in the decades since play by mail games first achieved a fairly wide degree of prominence and success, back before PBM companies bit the hand that fed them - *games printed on paper*.

These days, technology is everywhere that one casts their eyes. One of the things that I find to be the most interesting about PBM gaming is how it used to be the case that PBM games were the biggest multi-player games going. The transition to the Internet era meant that PBM was about to meet multi-player games that would utterly dwarf even the best multi-player offerings that PBM had to offer. PBM games that featured dozens - *or even hundreds* - of multi-player positions in the same game gave way to Internet games that could host thousands of players, simultaneously. Thus, what was once upon a time ago one of PBM gaming's biggest selling points eventually lost the luster of its numbers edge. For sheer number of players in one game, PBM gaming could no longer keep up. It could no longer compete.

Which is why I think that PBM gaming might be well-served to return to its roots. Just as postal gaming was discovered once upon a time ago, likewise, the postal medium could just as easily be rediscovered, once again. The paper-format of PBM games of yesterday was a feature, not a flaw. Envelopes containing the sheer excitement of turn results in paper form was not a design flaw. The time between turns that using the postal service to shuttle turn orders and turn results to and from players and PBM companies was a proven and demonstrated mechanism to master the pacing of games. Leave it to PBM companies and GMs to now snub their noses at that very thing that made PBM gaming possible, at all, to begin with. *Oh, how the mighty have fallen!*

PBM players speak of nostalgia as if that's a bad thing. From my perspective, it isn't. The whole reason that nostalgia for PBM exists, at all, is because it was created. It didn't just happen. There was something about PBM gaming that engendered nostalgia in the first place. For all of their new-found technological prowess and technological efficiencies, how many commercial PBM companies have more players, now, than they had way back when?

PBM companies of yesteryear were like craft breweries of gaming. While PBM isn't dead, now, it *felt* more alive, back then. Back then, though, new PBM games were regularly brought to market. These days, PBM companies have really dialed back their creativity - *and the PBM scene vividly shows it!* That's why PBM gaming resembles a desert, these days, with sparse pickings. If all that a PBM game is, is a turn-based game, then why not just play any game that one can find online, these days? There's so many turn-based games in existence online, that people no longer see the PBM trees for the gaming forest.

A whole range of game types are different forms of turn-based gaming. You can have turn-based gaming without ever venturing forth to, or stumbling upon, PBM games. Board games are turn-based games, as are card games, as are games that feature wargaming with miniatures. There's all kinds of turn-based games that you can download and play upon your smartphone these days, also. You can go on the World Wide Web, and find an endless supply of turn-based games. Indeed, more turn-based games come into creation faster than you can play them all. PBM games are, I believe, greater than the sum of their individual parts. From my perspective, PBM companies cannibalized their games, to a large degree. Oh, sure, I definitely think that PBM companies had good intentions. They wanted to "modernize" their games for newer generations. Well, how did that work out for the PBM industry as a whole? PBM games didn't just die out. They were killed off in a wholesale manner. Is PBM gaming of today better than PBM gaming of decades ago? No, not really. How often do new PBM games come into existence, these days? Or are the PBM games that are in existence, right now, to be the last hurrah of play by mail gaming? Have the letters "PBM" now become relegated to being little more than a hood ornament for a once-proud genre of gaming? If Technology was the answer to PBM's problems, then why has PBM become a mere shell of its former self?

The last several years, I have spent a good deal of time reacquainting myself with the art of writing letters. There are several individuals that I correspond with on either a regular or semi-regular basis. The experience of sending and receiving e-mails pales in comparison to the older form that is letters. PBM gaming in paper-format using the postal service is very similar to communicating via letters. That many no longer do it doesn't mean that the older format is deficient or less enjoyable than it ever was. I am not a person who is anti-technology. Far from it, in fact. I embrace and make use of all sorts of modern technological wonders. However, it has been and remains my personal first-hand experience that there are a number of things in life that technological progress doesn't seem to have improved upon - *and one of those things is PBM gaming.*

I say that it's time to unearth the very things that made PBM gaming flourish in the first place. Technological offerings are not an evil, in and of themselves. But then again, neither are game offerings in paper-format. Gaming via the postal system is a service. It's *still* as fun as it *ever* was. When I receive turn results in the mail for [Hyborian War](#), a Play-By-Mail game where you control the destiny of the Hyborian Age of Conan, it's still a grand feeling to look inside of my mailbox at the post office and see new turn results waiting there for me. *That's a feeling, right there, that never grows old!* In a day and an age when craft breweries are going strong, and the selection of craft beverages is exploding, I can't help but to think that PBM gaming needs to recover some of its craft brewing of games, like in the good old days. That creativity of old, far more than the multi-player aspect, itself, was really where a great portion of the PBM magic of old originated from.

Play By Mail gaming for the modern age needs to be more than technological grave robbers who cling to the PBM acronym. Playing games via the postal system was a lot of fun – and it's *still* a *lot* of fun! Fun, it's worth noting, never goes out of fashion. Ironically, though, PBM companies of old seem to have great difficulty marketing their gaming wares to modern day gamers. Having shifted their loyalty to the Internet and away from the postal medium, PBM companies have helped to disperse the PBM gaming crowd to other gaming waters. In doing so, they have helped to facilitate their own downsizing.

That PBM companies for the most part no longer really care about even bothering with the postal medium as a mechanism for entertaining gamers is more a reflection of the companies' changing philosophies and priorities than it is a reflection upon the postal medium as a viable medium for gaming. As with many things in life, others could always step in and revitalize traditional play by mail gaming. Whether they will or not, only time will tell. People can make all kinds of predictions. PBM companies and GMs certainly made all kinds of predictions back in the day about the Internet and technology. Most of them are no longer anywhere to be found.

The postal system is still quite viable, indeed, as a medium for entertaining people with games. Whenever I send letters to people that I know, what if I also began including turn results for a game to be played alongside the letters sent and received? I wonder if anyone would find that entertaining? Instead of companies that want to “hit it big,” what if the future of PBM gaming wasn't dependent upon companies that wanted to “hit it big?” What if fun and creativity became the driving forces of a new era in PBM gaming? What if PBM games of the future were more personalized things, entertainment with a greater emphasis on personalized aspects? What PBM gaming needs is some new thinkers and some new doers.



<http://www.reality.com/dmprosp.htm>

Sufficient creativity could spark a new wave of games playable by mail. It takes effort. It requires initiative. Even a certain degree of old fashioned dedication is necessary, if new PBM games are ever to rise to the fore to claim a place of their own in the annals of gaming, again. Every PBM game that ever came into existence required the unleashing of the human imagination – *and that is one thing that not even the Internet has replaced*. We each have one, and just as previous generations mastered the art of gaming by mail, likewise, future generations could master it just as easily. Perhaps even more so, in fact.

Why should they want to, though? Because the Internet isn't everything. These days, it is an Internet of things. And what of the real world? Has it ceased to exist, simply because there's an Internet, now, also? The mail still runs. The postal service still exists. People still have actual, physical mailboxes. Before Internet and video games, the mailbox was a center for gaming in many people's households. Amazingly enough, it still is. Most have never experienced gaming that way. I have, and I still do. That's how I know that it's still a viable and enjoyable and exciting way to play games.

Hand-moderated games will always have their own innate appeal, and when presented in a play by mail format, a game crafted from *your* imagination can be shared with others and played via the postal medium, the same way that other PBM games have been played over a span of decades.

If you want to have your PBM game programmed, yet you know nothing about programming, then there are sites on the Internet where you can obtain programming services to aid you in your bid to launch a fully automated PBM game, or even a computer-assisted one. One such place to start your exploration is a place like [fiverr.com](https://www.fiverr.com). You could have your PBM game programmed in segments, if you didn't want to tackle such a project in one fell swoop.

There is a ton of gaming-related content already in existence that could possibly be converted to play by mail format, provided that you could reach agreement with the owner(s) of such intellectual property, and one such place worthy of further exploration to get an idea of what might be possible is [DriveThruRPG](https://www.drivethrurpg.com). Not every IP owner might be receptive to a PBM version of their gaming material, but many might well be, provided that someone bothered to contact them about it in the first place.

Play-By-Mail gaming was new, once, and it can be new, again. Or will the sad and harsh reality of recent years simply continue on as it is, bringing us more of the same, thereby resulting in a continuation of a bleak landscape for PBM?

PBM Archaeological Discoveries

[A Dissertation on Gaming](https://richardjonesblog.quora.com/A-dissertation-on-gaming) – by Richard Jones

<https://richardjonesblog.quora.com/A-dissertation-on-gaming>

* This article definitely falls under the “must read” category for die-hard fans of play by mail gaming. If you don't read it, it's your loss. It's a long read, and not an article that you can consume in its entirety in just a few seconds. So, prepare yourself for that, before you click on that link, above.



<http://www.reality.com/frprosp.htm>



Where We're Heading

This is the very first issue of **PBM Unearthed**, which is not a PBM magazine but a PBM newsletter (sort of a really scaled back version of a PBM magazine), one which I hope becomes a regular feature in the realm of play by mail gaming. Care to tag along for the ride?

Having handed off [Suspense & Decision](#) magazine to Jon Capps, and with Issue #20 of it having now been published, I find myself not completely out of the PBM picture, yet. I still have a little energy left in me for the genre of gaming that is play by mail, and I wanted to try my hand at something similar, yet different. And this is the first issue of that, a little undertaking that I refer to as **PBM Unearthed**. I strove to come up with a name that is colorful. Hopefully, whether with this first issue or with any later issue, you'll find something that you enjoy, somewhere along the way.

The eight page limit per issue of **PBM Unearthed** was a conscious, deliberate choice on my part for the length of this newsletter. Whenever I write letters, four pieces of paper (of the kind of paper that I use) equals one postal ounce. So, by keeping the issues fairly short, I can stay under that limit. It eliminates some of the guesswork for me. Postal ounces are a consideration for me primarily when I send a hard print copy to someone in prison (here in the United States). Also, at a maximum of eight pages (printed on both the front and back of the four sheets of paper), no issue of **PBM Unearthed** should present a crisis over on the production end of things. It will be a way for me to continue on publishing bits and pieces about play by mail gaming – *and to do so in a way that allows me the freedom to do it as I want to do it.*

Hopefully, as we progress forth into additional issues, others across the PBM realm will see fit to join in, contributing articles, photos, and other assorted items of PBM interest. I am hopeful, also, that **PBM Unearthed** will provide a mechanism for the incarcerated portion of the overall play by mail gaming community to share with us all tales of PBM gaming from their end of the PBM spectrum. There is a sizable chunk of PBM players who are locked away from society at large, yet who peacefully participate in PBM gaming, even if many might not realize that. Perhaps **PBM Unearthed** can help unearth what's going on with PBM gaming in that neck of the PBM woods.

I can no more foresee the future of **PBM Unearthed** than I could foresee the future of **Suspense & Decision** magazine, back when I first attempted to bring it into existence, back in the day. Whether or not **S&D** made any real difference to PBM gaming, I leave to others to decide that for themselves. Maybe I can avoid some of the problems that plagued my run with **S&D**, and provide a more reliable PBM publication with **PBM Unearthed** in a sharply scaled back form.

Being a much smaller PBM publication, if you print yourself a copy of it on your home printer, it shouldn't be too taxing on your ink or toner. **PBM Unearthed** will be a free PBM publication. Advertising for PBM and other forms of tun-based gaming will be free, also. This first issue of **PBM Unearthed** features only ads for play by mail games ran by [Reality Simulations, Inc.](#) - the very first PBM company that I ever played a PBM game with, and which I continue to play a PBM game with, today. Call it nostalgia, call it a form of appreciation. **Lee, Sandy, Markus, and the rest of the RSI gang, thank you for decades of PBM fun!**

PLAY

HYBORIAN WAR™

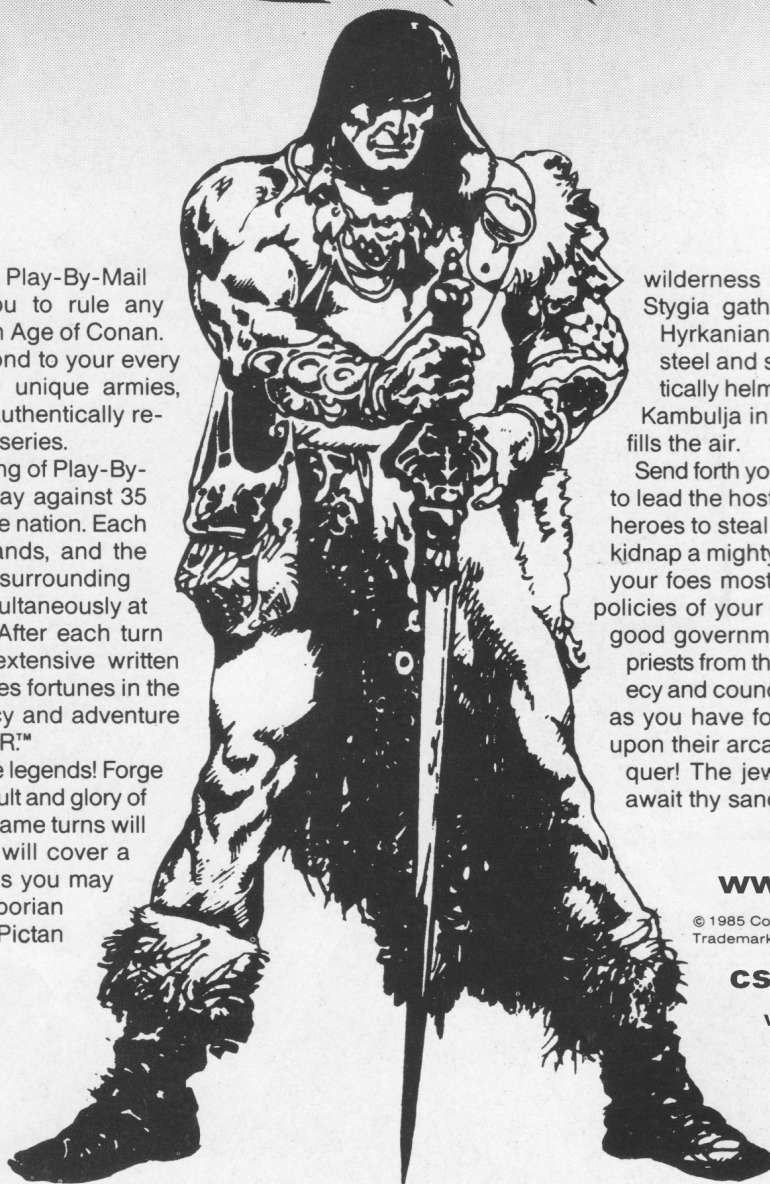
IMPERIAL CONQUEST IN THE AGE OF



HYBORIAN WAR™ is a Play-By-Mail game which allows you to rule any Kingdom in the Hyborian Age of Conan. Your Kingdom will respond to your every command with its own unique armies, leaders and culture — Authentically re-created from the Conan series.

In the imaginative setting of Play-By-Mail gaming you can play against 35 players from all across the nation. Each game turn your commands, and the commands of the rulers surrounding you, will be resolved simultaneously at our processing center. After each turn you will receive back extensive written accounts of your countries fortunes in the battle, intrigue, diplomacy and adventure which is HYBORIAN WAR™.

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wilderness in the west, to slumbering Stygia gathering her wizards, to the Hyrkanian kingdoms with riders in steel and silk and gold, to the fantastically helmed armies of the Khitai and Kambulja in the east, the cry of empire fills the air.

Send forth your tested lords and generals to lead the host. Send forth your spys and heroes to steal the treasures of the world, kidnap a mighty noble, or even assassinate your foes most gifted wizard! Decree the policies of your land, giving your subjects good government or bad. Call forth your priests from their temples to speak prophecy and council. Command such wizards as you have for the tide of war may turn upon their arcane magics. Rule and conquer! The jeweled thrones of the earth await thy sandaled tread.

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Hyborian War - Duel2 - and Forgotten Realms play-by-mail games